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ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)
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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WASHINGTON

August 25, 1977

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MEMORANDUM FOR: DR. ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI

FROM: Warren Christopher, Acting *WC*

SUBJECT: The President's Interest in Argentine Human Rights Improvements

Our Embassy in Buenos Aires has now responded to the instructions sent to it concerning the President's interest in human rights improvements in Argentina. The exchange of messages on this subject is attached. The Embassy concludes that recent steps have some substance, but recommends caution with respect to associating the President with any specific favorable developments. Nevertheless, our Charge in Buenos Aires did call the attention of the Minister of Economy, the key civilian in the Argentine government, to the President's statement at Yazoo City. According to the White House transcript of July 21, the President said, "We have seen recently in Argentina 342 political prisoners, who had been there for a long time, released."

I.

We can point to the following hopeful human rights developments:

-- Prisoner releases. While the announcement of the release of 342 political prisoners is a positive sign, it should be noted that we can only confirm categorically that there have been four releases, and that we do not yet know what proportion of those released have actually been freed without charges and what proportion have been charged formally and must face trial. In the six weeks since, the Argentine government has reported 122 detentions and 77 releases.

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-- Right of option. It seems likely that the Argentine government will restore a limited form of the "right of option," whereby state of siege prisoners may seek voluntary exile. This will be an important measure if it actually leads to prisoner releases.

-- Political tolerance and the courts. There are signs that President Videla may be gaining support from other generals for a greater ventilation of political ideas with civilian leaders. This has prompted Argentina's oldest party, the Radicals, to criticize the government's human rights record. The Radicals were accused of engaging in politics by the government, but rather than summarily punish the politicians, the government took the case to the courts. The lower courts ruled against the government, and the matter is under appeal. An Argentine government ban against the Jehovah's Witnesses is now in the Supreme Court, and there is hope that the court will declare the ban unconstitutional.

II.

On the other hand, the human rights situation remains very unsatisfactory in Argentina, particularly in the Buenos Aires region.

-- Eight lawyers or their wives were kidnapped at a sea resort near Buenos Aires in mid-July; one subsequently was found murdered brutally. It appears the others were later released. It seems likely that the security forces were responsible. (It is noteworthy that Argentina's most important newspaper, La Nacion, which has not distinguished itself on behalf of human rights, called unequivocally on July 18 for the Argentine government to protect lawyers from barbarism.)

-- In mid-July, Argentina's Ambassador to Venezuela was kidnapped in Buenos Aires. He has not been found yet. It appears that the kidnapping reflected hard-line military resentment against President Videla, who made a very successful state visit to Venezuela in May.

-- The publisher of the only major Argentine newspaper, which has demonstrated consistent courage on behalf of human rights, is being held by the government on economic charges at a secret place of detention; he was tortured.

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-- At least five labor leaders have been warned recently to leave Argentina. Earlier this month a prominent Jewish leader fled to the United States after being threatened.

Nearly all serious violations of human rights in Argentina are now taking place in the Buenos Aires military region. The commander of the region, General Suarez Mason, is a notorious hard-liner, and is viewed as one of Videla's principal rivals for power; Suarez is seconded by a retired general who acts as governor. These men are being held responsible by many for the latest round of violence.

Given the delicate political situation in Argentina, as well as the possibly hopeful but very uncertain human rights situation, I believe that we should await developments before further public comment. We will remain alert for favorable developments, as the President has directed, and for appropriate opportunities to express his gratification.

Attachments:

1. State 162292, dated July 12, 1977.
2. Buenos Aires 5303, dated July 18, 1977.
3. Buenos Aires 5522, dated July 27, 1977.

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Concurrence: D/HA:MSchneider
P - Mr. Tice
SYP - Mr. Feinberg